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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001856

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKAN FOREIGN MINISTER SAYS ROAD AHEAD
"MURKY" FOLLOWING NORWEGIANS' VISIT

REF: COLOMBO 1852

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a November 16 meeting with the Ambassador, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar noted a "lack of clarity" in the peace process following the Norwegian facilitators' November 11 meeting with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) chief Prabhakaran. Prabhakaran's ambiguous response to the Government's overture, conveyed by the Norwegians, that each side publicly endorse the Oslo communique has left the Government unsure of how best to proceed, Kadirgamar indicated. Despite the lack of progress, President Kumaratunga plans to address the nation within the next few days--well before Prabhakaran's annual policy speech on November 27--on the peace process. Kadirgamar, as usual, expressed confidence that the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the President's maverick coalition partner, will support her efforts to reopen negotiations. Absent other signs of progress on the peace front, the President seems determined to pre-empt Prabhakaran's Heroes' Day thunder by depicting her government as more forward leaning and more flexible than the Tigers--even if neither she nor the LTTE has modified their respective positions significantly over the past six months. End summary.

NORWEGIANS' LUNCH WITH PRABHAKARAN:
INCONCLUSIVE AND CONFUSING

2. (C) In a November 16 meeting with the Ambassador, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said that Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Petersen's November 11 meeting with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) chief Prabhakaran in Kilinochchi (Reftel) had resulted in only a greater "lack of clarity" about the Tigers' intentions and how best to move ahead on the peace process. "Our impression was that the Norwegian facilitators themselves were confused by their conversation with Prabhakaran," he said, and were thus "not able to formulate clearly what had happened" in the meeting. As a result, the debrief that Petersen gave the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) before his departure on November 11 was "indistinct," leaving next steps on the peace process "murky," Kadirgamar commented.

3. (C) Kadirgamar said that Petersen (who was accompanied to Kilinochchi by Vidar Helgesen, his Deputy Foreign Minister, Special Envoy to Sri Lanka Erik Solheim, and Norwegian Ambassador Hans Brattskar) had clearly conveyed to Prabhakaran the GSL's message asking the LTTE leader to make some kind of public reference to the Oslo Declaration that would indicate support for its principles. (Note: The Oslo Declaration refers to a communique issued by Norway and agreed to by both parties to the conflict during the third round of peace talks in December 2002. The statement committed both parties to exploring a solution "founded on the principle of self-determination . . . based on a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka." Recent statements by Tiger theoretician Anton Balasingham appearing to repudiate the Oslo Declaration have raised concerns that the Tigers may be reneging on their earlier commitment to a solution within a federal system. End note.) Since "Oslo is code word for federalism," Kadirgamar explained, the GSL wants to be assured of the Tigers' continued commitment to the basic principles outlined in the communique. If Prabhakaran would make such a statement, Kadirgamar said, the GSL could make a reciprocal statement, either from President Kumaratunga or through Norway, reaffirming its own commitment. Prabhakaran reportedly offered no immediate response to the overture, according to the Norwegians' report, until the group moved to lunch. At that point, he told Petersen, through an interpreter, that if the GSL were looking for a one-line message from him, his one-line message would be that talks could only resume on the basis of the Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA), the Tigers' controversial proposal for an interim administration. According to Kadirgamar, Petersen said that he did not know what to think of Prabhakaran's

cryptic comment--whether to interpret it as a rejection of the GSL overture or a foretaste of his upcoming annual Heroes' Day policy speech scheduled for November 27. Kadirgamar added, however, that the GSL construed Prabhakaran's remark about the one-liner as "a bit of a slap in the face."

14. (C) Adding to the confused atmosphere was an interview Balasingham had given to a pro-LTTE Tamil vernacular newspaper on November 12, Kadirgamar noted. (Note: The interview slammed the GSL position, as conveyed by the Norwegians, as nothing "special or new." Balasingham also reiterated the long-standing Tiger position that the ISGA must form the sole basis for resumed negotiations and cannot be linked to any possible permanent settlement in the discussions. He sidestepped taking a position on federalism, but said that the Oslo communique did not necessarily preclude Tiger demands for a separate state. End note.) While Kadirgamar sees the sentiments expressed in the interview as a step backward, the President takes an optimistic view, the Foreign Minister said, inexplicably seeing unidentified "building blocks" in Balasingham's statements that offer a way forward. "She's in that frame of mind," he concluded, "wanting to be optimistic" about the peace process--even if there is little basis for sanguinity.

PRESIDENT TO ADDRESS NATION;
JVP APPEARS AMENABLE

15. (C) A follow-up briefing with Solheim and Helgesen after Petersen's departure on November 12 brought no greater clarity, Kadirgamar said. Instead, Helgesen had told Kadirgamar that the Norwegians were unable to predict what might happen next in the peace process and suggested that the GSL not make any statements before Prabhakaran's Heroes' Day speech. Nonetheless, President Kumaratunga plans to address the nation either November 16 or 17 on the peace process, he reported. "We've decided to say something . . .irrespective of (and before) whatever Prabhakaran will say." While acknowledging that he does not know exactly what the President plans to say, he speculated that she might make a statement reaffirming her government's commitment--including the recalcitrant JVP--to resuming negotiations based on the Oslo principles. While the President's address might convey "a bit of an invitation" to resume talks, Kadirgamar said he expects the President "to come out strongly in favor of federalism and Oslo on a take-it-or-leave-it basis."

16. (C) Kadirgamar said that recent discussions he has conducted, apparently on the President's behalf, with the JVP have done much to secure the coalition partner's agreement to support resumed negotiations. Kadirgamar said he, along with Information Minister Mangala Samaraweera, planned to hold the third round of talks with the JVP leadership later the same day. The JVP is "keen to start talks" with the Tigers and is willing to consider discussions on an interim administration as long as such a proposal is part of an integral solution, he said. He believes he is close to obtaining JVP agreement on a joint statement of support for negotiations--perhaps the same statement Prabhakaran has stipulated as proof that the President's efforts are supported by Sinhalese nationalists in the south (Reftel). The joint statement would likely express support for a settlement along the lines expressed in the joint communique issued by the Indian and Sri Lankan governments following the President's November 3-7 visit to India (septel): acceptable to all communities; consistent with democracy, pluralism and human rights; any interim arrangement discussed must be "an integral part" of a final settlement; unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity of Sri Lanka must be maintained. It would be good if an agreement signed by the General Secretaries of both the JVP and the President's Sri Lanka Freedom Party were ready in time for the President's address to the nation, Kadirgamar said hopefully.

COMMENT

17. (C) The GSL invited the Norwegian Foreign Minister to Sri Lanka in order to ensure that Prabhakaran--whose aides, we suspect, filter out unpleasant or unwanted information from reaching their reclusive leader--heard its message directly. Whether Prabhakaran understood the GSL-via-Norwegians message is hard to say; neither the Norwegians nor the GSL, at any rate, seems to have understood his response. Indications are not promising for a breakthrough--or even some recognition of the tough messages reportedly given to his delegation during their European tour--in Prabhakaran's upcoming policy speech. The President has apparently decided not to wait till November 27 to hear the same rehashing of Tiger talking points on the ISGA--especially if Prabhakaran plans to backtrack from Sri Lanka's hard-won support of a federal solution. Instead, she

seems ready to take the initiative--with JVP support, if the Foreign Minister's optimistic forecasts prove correct--by emphasizing her government's commitment to a peaceful political settlement. If her address to the nation follows Kadirgamar's outline, she will have successfully lobbed the ball for resuming negotiations back into the Tigers' den, just a few brief days before Prabhakaran's own major address to his "nation."

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